

CHAPTER ONE

MARALYS:

I NEVER THOUGHT I'D lose a son to hang gliding. It just never seemed possible that the sport we'd watched and applauded—the sport we'd taken on as a business and nurtured from infancy—could turn around and bite us. And Eric! How could it have been our third son, Eric, they called about, when all along it was Bobby who took the risks, Bobby who'd made a private pact with Luck?

Of all our six boisterous children, only Bobby, the oldest, lived on the edge of disaster. He drove his truck as though pursued by hit men. He rode his Bultaco motorcycle full bore down dirt roads at night, mindless of potholes, going airborne over whatever road junk he couldn't see. He flew his hang glider off unfamiliar mountains, playing the odds like an eagle—imagining he could make the flight work out and not worrying about the wind or the terrain or who would pick him up down below.

So why was it Eric—affable, non-daring Eric—they called about?

I remember that I was caught off guard ... things had been going so right in our family, and Rob and I had come to expect it—as though we deserved our good luck after all the difficult years with Bobby, as though we'd paid our dues raising five rambunctious boys

and now we couldn't be touched. Bobby was the one who lived dangerously, and he seemed destined to escape.

As a family we were flying high indeed, and nothing was going to bring us down.

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I HAVE ONLY A vague impression of Eric leaving that Saturday, ambling long-legged through our kitchen, his wavy hair too long as always, his manner relaxed and pleasant. He was twenty. I suppose he was, as usual, loose and unhurried, whether he was in a hurry or not. Eric had always been one of those kids you enjoyed having around because he accepted life like a philosopher—with amusement and perspective.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Flying,” he said, taking a banana from the fruit dish.

“Who are you going with?”

He shrugged, peeling down yellow strips. “Danny Wilson and some guys. You don't know the rest.” His blue eyes turned in my direction, a dismissive look. “I've gotta go, Mom. They're waiting.”

“Okay,” I said.

An unremarkable conversation. I was busy making breakfast and didn't notice what he was wearing, didn't find out where they'd be flying. Later I asked myself, *Why didn't you look at him there in the kitchen, really look at him as he left, so you'd have something to remember?*

But why would I? I never imagined he wouldn't be coming back.

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WE WERE HAVING COMPANY for dinner that evening. It was a March morning, and I was on my way to the grocery store, driving down Seventeenth Street, thinking absently that the sky had a strange pall for spring, that it looked oddly red and smoggy, even ominous. Suddenly I envisioned disaster, an earthquake or an atomic blast—something worldwide, nothing personal. Because I had once

reacted badly to a family emergency, I vowed at that moment to be brave. I actually sat up a little straighter in the car and took a deep breath and set the pointer on my mental screen to BRAVE.

And then I forgot all about it.

Afternoon was smoggier still. Rob and I went to a swim meet and watched our fourth son, Kenny, then a broad-shouldered seventeen, set a county record in the butterfly. But we didn't stay for the whole meet.

While Rob went out for nuts and beer, I skimmed over the house: picked up tennis shoes, gave a cursory dusting to the trophies that crammed the mantle and the top of the television. They represented six different sports, and I was once again thinking how curious it was that our children had made us known as a sports family when Rob and I had been raised as eggheads. It was just one of those accidental turnings down a path you hadn't planned on—exactly like the hang gliding.

When the call came, I looked up from setting the table, impatient because I was running late as always.

A male voice asked, "Is Mr. Wills there?"

I said he wasn't but I would take a message.

There was no response, just a muted sound of breath drawn in.

Come on, I thought. Say it. Please. I'm in a hurry.

The man took his time. "When will Mr. Wills be back?"

Something came to me then, some overtone that made the voice vaguely familiar. I said, "Is this Danny Wilson?"

"Yes. I have to talk to your husband." He sounded different—hoarse and strained—and I was instantly curious. I thought, This is me, Maralys, you see me at the shop all the time, you know me lots better than you know Rob. I said, "You can talk to *me*, Danny."

Still he hesitated, and through the silence I felt his unwillingness to say more. The moment was short, only a few seconds, because suddenly I knew what it was about. I began to tremble. I said, "It's Eric, isn't it? Eric's had an accident."

"Yes," he said. His manner was calm, strangely matter-of-fact. "I'm afraid he's D.O.A."

I stood rooted to the spot. Uncomprehending. Refusing to

understand. He'd used police jargon. A code. Mothers don't know police talk.

Yet I knew full well.

Holding the phone away, I screamed for my daughter, Tracy. She came running and stood in the doorway like a skitterish, long-legged colt, her hazel eyes wide with apprehension. She was fifteen. "Eric's dead," I blurted, too stung to be easy on her.

I turned back to the phone. From a chasm, a hole so deep I could scarcely speak out of it, I heard myself asking, "Where?" heard the words, "San Bernardino," and realized I couldn't listen further.

"I can't talk," I said, breaking down. I hung up the phone and gathered Tracy in my arms. We clung to each other, sobbing.

After that I went on autopilot and a voice—mine—began making phone calls: canceling our dinner guests, calling our second son, Chris, to come home from UCLA.

I found a dishrag and wiped the drain board—chased every crumb and speck, loaded the dishwasher, packed food into containers, put dishes away—as if it mattered, as if a clean kitchen was important.

A neighbor appeared and put an arm across my shoulder. "Why don't you let us do that? Come on, Maralys, sit down."

I looked at her, dazed, and shook my head; it was impossible. I couldn't sit and I couldn't explain. Instead I wiped the stove and found the broom and swept the kitchen floor. The neighbor stood by and watched. Neither of us understood. But I understand now. I was clinging to what I knew, staving off hysteria with small, familiar acts so I'd feel anchored and the world would seem real.

Eric, I thought. *Eric, where are you?*

Gradually the house filled with friends; mysteriously, they were simply *there*. One by one, with tears in their eyes, they drew me into their arms. But in the midst of their coming I drew back, stricken with fear. *Rob! What would he do?*

Suddenly I envisioned a second disaster—Rob hearing the news and going crazy, exploding in some terrible, unpredictable way. Rob had never accepted even the small setbacks in life. Though deep down I think he hopes for the best, his lawyer's mind conjures up the worst. Since the beginning, he'd taken minor injuries to our

Higher Than Eagles

children as an assault by fate, cursing the damage and the injustice, often blaming me in lieu of blaming a God he couldn't quite believe in. What would he do now? I simply couldn't predict.

And then Rob was there, standing puzzled in the doorway. All these people, I could see him thinking, not our dinner guests. What was going on?

Our neighbor, Ed—Big Ed, who knows what to say—went to him swiftly, laid a hand on Rob's shoulder. "Rob . . . I'm sorry," a deep, comforting voice. "Eric's had an accident."

Rob waited, his jaw tightening. "How bad?"

"It's bad. Very bad."

Still Rob waited.

Quietly. "It's as bad as it can get."

Rob sat down. He stared up at Ed. Then he put his hand over his face and cried.

I hurried across the room to gather Rob in my arms. We always return, I thought. In the beginning there was just us, and now, without Eric, there is just us again.

It wasn't true, but that's how it seemed.

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FOR THE NEXT FEW days we stumbled through everything that had to be done when you're finalizing somebody's life.

After the funeral, we gathered in the living room to talk. The formalities were over, but our hang gliding business was still there, a broken down car momentarily abandoned. Sooner or later we had to walk back and decide what to do.

Nobody wanted to speak. The subject seemed almost obscene.

We spread out around the room, and I looked across at Rob. He sat heavily on the blue couch, an elbow propped on its upholstered arm, his chin in his hand. His eyes rested on Chris, twenty-two, who'd been the rock in our family forever. Who was born mature. A younger, shorter version of Rob—round cheeks, strong chin, hazel eyes that moved restlessly—Chris was unwilling to begin discussing the business he'd started.

Rob said, “You all know what we’re here for—to make a decision about *Wills Wing*.”

Chris shifted in his chair. “I wondered about it, coming down from school.”

I felt his unspoken question: *Will I to have to give up flying?*

Bobby, who’d been called home from a movie-making stint in Hawaii, said quietly, “I thought about it, too, coming home on the plane.”

It was a flat statement, unemotional. He said it with his gaze fixed at some point on the rug. Sitting on the fireplace hearth, he let his hands dangle, still and purposeless, while his unusually long legs seemed to stretch halfway across the room. They were heavy legs, filling every inch of his jeans, and his feet were consistent—he wore size thirteen shoes. With his head bowed, Bobby’s chin nearly touched his chest.

I thought, *It is for you, Bobby, that Rob is asking the question.*

Then Rob spoke directly to Bobby. “This business isn’t for Mom and me, and Chris doesn’t need it. He’s headed for medical school. We only started it in the first place for you and Eric.” He paused, leaving words unsaid. “If we let it go, what will you do?”

Bobby shrugged but didn’t answer.

I studied him as he sat there thinking his private thoughts, and I reflected on his hang gliding and the differences between him and Chris. For whatever extra Chris had outside the sport, Bobby had that much less, but in flying he had more—infinately more. In the air Bobby was master, flying with so much grace he was always the pilot other pilots watched. As obsessive as Chris was about flying, Bobby seemed born to it. Chris had knowledge, but Bobby had instincts.

“Bobby,” Rob said, “it’s your decision.”

No, no, I thought, that’s wrong. I said, “Rob, we can’t put this on Bobby’s shoulders, it isn’t fair. Either we keep the place open or we don’t.”

Under his breath Rob said, “We must be insane even considering it. We’ve already paid a horrible price for this business . . . horrible.”

I nodded. Somewhere down deep I knew that what had happened

once could happen again, and I thought, *Why would we even think of going on?*

Then I looked at Bobby again, and something about his face made me see things clearer. Twenty-three now, but with a look of resignation that took me back years. I thought of his childhood—the illness, the unhappiness, the monumental battles with his dad. Even more, I remembered the kind of boy he was—sadistic at times and funny at other times, but different, always different, forever searching for ways to express the offbeat ideas that floated through his head.

Offbeat ideas, yes. Also screwy. Humorous. And useless. “His life is a joke,” Rob said in those days. “He’s headed nowhere.”

So that’s how it is, I thought. Bobby’s past was the key. A difficult past and largely behind us, but important nevertheless. Because you couldn’t decide what Bobby ought to do until you looked at where he’d been.

When I thought back to the beginnings, to the events that would shape our decision, I realized the rest of us were merely *there*. The beginnings were all Bobby.